

# Defending China's National Image and 'Defensive Soft Power': the Case of Hong Kong's 'Umbrella Revolution'

Dylan Loh<sup>1,2</sup>

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**Abstract** This study examines the pro-democracy protests of Hong Kong in 2014 and how the protests became sites for Beijing's representations of Chinese national image(s). It argues that '*defensive soft power*' can be used to understand the process through which Beijing made such representations and projections. 'Defensive soft power', extending on Nye's soft power is operationally defined as the reactionary activities taken in response to actions that harm or potentially harm a country's national image. Based on an analysis of the data drawn from three mainland news media, several perceptions of China emerge - China as a victim; China as 'reasonable' power; and China as benign and tolerant leader in the China-Hong Kong relation. This research highlights the 'Umbrella Revolution' as an instance where 'defensive soft power' was used to (1) fend off negative national images and (2) project positive national images. Mapping out the process of national image defence will enable readers to better understand a sovereign state's strategies to defend attacks on and promote positive perceptions of its national image.

**Keywords** Chinese soft power · Hong Kong · Umbrella revolution · Contentious politics

## Introduction

One of the main Hong Kong protest movements of 2014, also known popularly as the 'Umbrella Revolution', was a series of protests that began in September 2014 and ended in mid-December that same year. The protestors – comprised mainly of students and youths – occupied areas in Central, Admiralty, Causeway Bay and Mong Kok

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✉ Dylan Loh  
dylan@ntu.edu.sg; mhl40@cam.ac.uk

<sup>1</sup> Department of Politics and International Studies, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

<sup>2</sup> Public Policy and Global Affairs Division, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Nanyang Technological University, #03-86, 14 Nanyang Drive, Singapore 637332, Singapore

bringing traffic in these places to a standstill [1]. The movement's sheer size and geographical spread is unprecedented with three 'occupation zones' located in the city's prime administrative hub and two major shopping areas with its epicentre in the government's headquarters in Admiralty. The catalyst for the street protests was the decision by the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress in mainland China to pre-approve candidates to run for elections in the Hong Kong's Legislative Council - even if the candidates receives at least 1 % endorsement by the electorate. The authority to pre-screen and select candidates still remains with the 1200 strong, pro-Beijing, nominating committee. The series of protests generated enormous interest inside and outside of Hong Kong and attracted sizeable international media attention [2]. Significantly for this article, this media scrutiny spotlighted China's handling of the protests, its governance model and censorship rules. China was caught largely unawares by the protest movement – with protestors numbering at an estimated 200,000 at its height [3] – as it reacted defensively to media criticism.

The paper argues that the protests did two things with regards to Beijing's image construction. First, as a reaction to the highly critical, mostly western, coverage of the protests, 'defensive soft power', through the media, was deployed to challenge these negative images. Second, the protests allowed Beijing to reinforce existing Chinese-held national images and also to articulate new images and perceptions of China. Studies on Chinese protest politics has grown in tandem with the explosion of internet, social and mobile technologies in China. Lei, for instance, argued that people in China who relied on the Internet for news are more likely to have differing views from the government.<sup>1</sup> Looking at more traditional social protests, Xi Chen's meticulous and in-depth study of the rise of social protests since the early 1990s showed how the political structure in China (while it underwent reform) opened up spaces for social protests. Chen further observed that 'routinized contentious' bargaining eventually strengthens the regime as a mechanism to address grievances head on.

Yet despite this growing body of literature [5] on domestic protests in China,<sup>2</sup> the literature on the *media coverage* of protest incidences remains thin [7]. This is puzzling because 'media' and its role in international relations have been highlighted in great detail.<sup>3</sup> Steinhart's research is one of the few attempts at throwing light unto media representations of protests events in China. Drawing on an analysis of news media coverage of major events, he contends that protest incidents in China has not become more frequent but rather, more visible. He argues that the acceleration of information through new technologies have strained the authorities' push to suppress information, creating openings for political activism to promote protestor sympathising accounts.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> [4] See also Benney, J. 2011. Twitter and legal activism in China. *Communication, Politics and Culture* 4: 5–20 and Yang, G. 2009. *The power of the Internet in China: citizen activism online*. New York: Columbia University Press.

<sup>2</sup> [6], also see O'Brien, J.K. ed. 2008. *Popular Protest in China* Massachusetts: Harvard University Press for a good overview on such research.

<sup>3</sup> [8] See also Carpenter, C. and Drezner, D.W. 2010. International Relations 2.0: The Implications of New Media for an Old Profession. *International Studies Perspectives* 11 L 255–272 for the role of new media on international relations.

<sup>4</sup> [7], 120.

His study however, looks at protest events in *mainland* China and of media representations for domestic consumption. There are no studies on media representations of China, as outwardly projected, as is the case of the Hong Kong 2014 protests. Furthermore, there are no studies that draw the link between how government responses to protest incidences can be an exercise of 'defensive soft power'. This research goes further by mapping out the expressions of defensive soft power through the construction of national images. A word about the social movement literature on Hong Kong is in order here since the 'Umbrella Movement' is clearly one. The integration of Hong Kong into China and China into the global economy has clear implications for protest spaces and for movements to emerge on both Hong Kong and the mainland.<sup>5</sup> Whilst Hong Kong has had a long history of protest movement, the return of Hong Kong saw an increase in movements that had a political element as opposed to purely bread and butter issues [9]. With specific regard to Hong Kong, it has been argued that the twenty-first century saw an increased 'politicization' of welfare issues as the general populace became more politically aware. This increased concern and awareness on issues such as the environment, the less privileged and democratic ideals.<sup>6</sup> Drawing on an analysis of three major news outlets, this paper establishes that, in reaction to negative press coverage, there is a concerted attempt to present and articulate, through the media, an image of China that its leaders want to reinforce and project. How this image projection is articulated and promoted is important because it adds to the understanding of China's 'soft power' and the extent to which it is willing to wield it and shape perceptions of its rise.

The Umbrella Revolution thus presents itself as a unique case study for three main reasons. First, it is not a 'purely' domestic protest as it is a Special Administrative Region (SAR). Furthermore, Hong Kong residents and the Chinese government see each other distinctly albeit under the 'one country, two systems' principle. Second, there was a large amount of international media attention on the protests [10] with most major western news outlet such as CNN, The Guardian, Bloomberg and many others featuring the protests heavily. Finally, Hong Kong presents itself as a logical site in understanding China politically; indeed, many scholars have attempted to look at Hong Kong to further understand China. Kuah-Pearce and Guiheux, for instance, studied protest politics in Mainland China and Hong Kong and observed that Hong Kong's own political activism influenced and affected Mainland China's own political activism. They further note that "The central government carefully scrutinises Hong Kong and its evolution because what is happening in the territory has an impact across the border. Because of Hong Kong's special status, the Beijing authorities cannot foresee what could happen one day across the border."<sup>7</sup> This observation is prescient as the Hong Kong protests of 2014 became that 'something' that the Central government could not predict.

There is also very clear basis for Beijing to be concerned with the protests. Firstly, as the protests took place in a SAR; the options for managing the demonstrations were limited. Moreover, as opposed to mainland China, where CCP controls the full scope of media programming [11] - the media landscape in Hong Kong is much more liberal and

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<sup>5</sup> [6].

<sup>6</sup> [9], 111–112.

<sup>7</sup> [6], 12.

contested. This prevents full control over the media depictions of protests as it has been able to with regards to mainland protests through censorship and mobilization [12]. Its response has thus been to primarily respond and react through the media levers it *can control*. And it is through these media levers (identified here as popular Chinese online newspapers) that Beijing attempts to influence and direct the depictions of the protests and in forming perceptions of the Chinese national image.

## National Image(s)

National image is clearly important to China as it is to any country in the international system. If employed effectively, it can serve a dual function of shoring up domestic support while expanding a country global and regional influence [13]. It has also been acknowledged that ‘images’ can be constructed by the state to deliberately influence and alter other people’s perception of one’s country [14]. Here, ‘national image’ is strongly associated with Joseph Nye’s ‘soft power’. Nye defines ‘soft power’ this way: “It is the ability to get others to want what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments.” [15] He further states that “This soft power – getting others to want the outcomes that you want – co-opts people rather than coerces them.”<sup>8</sup>

As this study shows, activities undertaken under the rubric of ‘national image’ can be ‘defensive’<sup>9</sup> as well as ‘offensive’<sup>10</sup>, or a combination of both. In the case of the Hong Kong protests, much of the media reaction sanctioned by the state was a reaction against the perceived negative ‘attack’ and criticism of China. This reactionary, defensive media response is not something new [17] and many scholars have pointed out the anti-Western, nationalistic nature of media in China<sup>11</sup>; what is lacking, though, is an investigation into the outcomes of such defensive media moves; a conceptual framework to account for these activities under the ambit of national image; and the effects it has on this national image.

There is no consensus on what constitute a ‘national image’ [18] and the literature on definitions of ‘national image’ is thin. Several concepts are used interchangeably such as ‘soft power’ or ‘nation branding’. There have been attempts to quantify ‘national image’. One example is the Fombrun-RI country index lists twenty items for six<sup>12</sup> different scopes of a country’s reputation to outsiders. [19] Another popular way of measuring and defining national image is the idea of ‘nation branding’ developed by Simon Anholt [20]. This index (‘Anholt-GfK Roper City Brands Index’) measures perceptions of countries through polling “nearly 20,000 people in 20 countries each year, asking more than 40 questions about their perceptions of 50 countries.” [21].

It is important to make a distinction here between ‘national identity’ and ‘national image’. National identity generally refers to an internal, collective schema [22], whereas ‘national image’ is outwardly directed to gain respect and prestige amongst

<sup>8</sup> [15], 5.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Offensive’ here refers to the capacities and activities undertaken to attract and enhance a country’s image.

<sup>10</sup> . [16] - Callahan does not use the term ‘offensive’ but uses the word ‘negative’ instead.

<sup>11</sup> [17], 73.

<sup>12</sup> The 6 dimensions here refer to: emotion appeal; social appeal; physical appeal; financial appeal; leadership appeal; and cultural appeal.

others.<sup>13</sup> This is an important distinction as it is this outward projection, through the media Beijing controls, that this research analyses. To be sure, media is just but one tool (amongst many others such as the military, government institutions, culture etc) through which one can gaze into how a country projects its national image. However, media is one of the most direct, pervasive and instantaneous ways to project images – literally and figuratively yet very understudied with regards to image projection. More pertinently, the purpose of this research is not to measure the national image<sup>14</sup> of China. Rather, it is to assess how China reacted to perceived criticism of its national image and how it subsequently took restorative actions to defend and also advance its national image.

While there is no doubt that countries do engage in attacking other countries images, the literature on soft power, as mentioned earlier, has largely ignored the 'offensive'/'negative' or 'defensive' uses of soft power [16]. In other words, the scholarship on soft power has generally been prejudicial and predisposed towards the 'positive' aspect of soft power. Even within China, discussions of Chinese soft power rest on and adhere to Nye's interpretations of the attractive and positive element inherent in soft power.<sup>15</sup> It is only very recently that scholars like Callahan identified the 'negative' aspects of soft power. He raised the incident where China's Ambassador to Britain - Liu Xiaoming - demonized Japan as 'Voldemort' as one such instance. He noted that in China, soft power is "negative rather than positive" and that it is employed "as a tool in domestic policy more than in foreign policy".<sup>16</sup> The author agrees with Callahan that there is a need for a more multi-dimensional view of soft power. His treatment of 'soft power' also broadens the analytical utility of Nye's soft power and allows it to be used to explore other aspects of soft power more generally. This research builds on Callahan's important expansion on 'soft power'. It moves beyond the positive/negative dialectic that Callahan adroitly argued and focuses on the 'defensive' aspect of soft power. It argues that soft power can be reactionary and defensive in nature as well - a characterization that has been well associated with China [24]. It also explores the dynamics in which 'soft power' can shift from 'defensive' or 'negative' to 'positive'.

## Defensive Soft Power

National images are a natural part of a country's soft power<sup>17</sup> and it can therefore be wielded to expand its influence and incite positive feelings to others on one's country through the tools (media, culture, sports, moral values, etc) deployed to promote its national images. By the same token, the range of tools that a state deploys to defend its national image falls under the rubric of soft power as well. However, the scholarship on 'soft power' is largely silent on this aspect. There is also a fair degree of conceptual

<sup>13</sup> See Anholt [20].

<sup>14</sup> However, it would be useful to set out the boundaries of which 'national image' will be deployed here. Thus, national image is operationally conceptualized as the positive, negative or mixed feelings, perceptions and images that other countries and people feel towards one's country.

<sup>15</sup> See [23] and also Nye, J. 2011. *The future of power*, p. 84. New York: Public Affairs and [16], 3.

<sup>16</sup> [16], 2.

<sup>17</sup> [13], 4.

ambiguity with regards to soft power and it is no surprise that it has been criticized for that. [25] Attempts have been made to clarify and inject further analytical clarity to soft power. In addition to Callahan's work, Mattern similarly attempts an expansion and reformulation of 'soft power' in the concept of 'representational force'. He contends that representational force opens up a space for coerciveness in 'attracting' others to do what one wants. Specifically, "a narrative expresses representational force when it is organised in such a way that it threatens the audience with unthinkable harm unless it submits, in word and in deed, to the terms of the speaker's viewpoint."<sup>18</sup> This is an important analytic refashioning of soft power insofar as it recognises the (potential) coerciveness of attraction but ultimately falls short in confronting instances where soft power is deployed (at least initially) defensively as this case study highlights.

There is therefore a need to conceive of an expansion of 'soft power' to accommodate the defensive and reactionary aspect of the soft power tools employed. Here, 'defensive soft power' is conceptualized as the reactionary activities that respond to perceived attacks and criticism on one's national image. The conceptualization of 'defensive soft power' is not mere semantics; it allows users to look into the intent of countries and how certain activities, in clearly welding the tools of soft power, welds them not in the traditionally understood way of 'soft power' but rather in a reactionary but concerted and defensive manner. This defensive soft power can also be opportunistically leveraged upon, as is the case of the Hong Kong protests, to stage counter-attacks and evolve to promoting positive images of a country in the more 'traditional' soft-power sense. Hence, beyond just highlighting the defensive aspect of soft power, it allows us to peer into process of how soft power morphs.

## Analysis of Chinese Media

The importance of media in projecting and disseminating national images is well documented [27]. One scholar notes that the media reportage on the incident by the Chinese papers is "not for the Hong Kong audience"; rather is "directed towards the United States and Britain"<sup>19</sup> and hence points to the outwardly directed nature of the news coverage of the Umbrella Revolution. Indeed, an interview undertaken with a protest participant revealed that Hong Kong people, generally, do not read any of the Mainland newspapers.<sup>20</sup> It is also clear that media reports released by the Chinese state owned media paints the protestors in a very bad light and that Beijing succeeded in moulding the domestic perception of the occupy movement as ordinary Chinese people's perceptions of the event were very negative [28]. So while the domestic utility of this particular coverage by Chinese papers cannot be denied,<sup>21</sup> neither can the external dimension of the media campaign<sup>22</sup> be dismissed or left unstudied.

<sup>18</sup> [26] - An important point to note here is that Mattern's concept of 'coercion' refers not to physical coercion but is framed in terms of 'subjectivity coercion' in which the other party's socio-linguistically constructed sense of self is threatened.

<sup>19</sup> Dr. Li Hak Yin, interview by author, Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, July 7, 2015.

<sup>20</sup> Jeffrey Wong, interview by author, Tin Hau, Hong Kong, July 7, 2015. Jeffrey was an active participant of the 'Umbrella Revolution' movement.

<sup>21</sup> Dr. Ting Wai, Interview by author, Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong, July 7, 2015.

<sup>22</sup> Dr. Li Hak Yin.

Media representations – what this study attempts to flesh out – is best analysed through content analysis. Steinhardt's methodology in his study of Chinese media propaganda and popular protests is most helpful.<sup>23</sup> He analysed media representations of domestic protests through the keywords - 'hostility' and 'sympathy' - in a content analysis of news media account of 31 major protest events from 2001 to 2010<sup>24</sup> – looking at keyword frequency and diachronically comparing media representations and non-representations through either 'hostile' or 'sympathetic' reportage. For this research, media content - principally media coverage and editorials by both Chinese and non-Chinese writers on the protests will be studied. Particular focus will be paid on how the media reports portray the protestors and the claimed characteristics of China and its national image. Armony and Velasquez's study on anti-Chinese online discourse in Latin America is also instructive. The authors looked at negative Facebook comments in eight leading Spanish-language newspapers from five countries through their official Facebook profiles. Their study revealed that 'soft power' is increasingly important as China expands its footprint in Latin American, however, Chinese presence triggered anxiety amongst locals and China's relations with Latin American countries also renewed the debate about the development path of these Latin American countries themselves [29].

Three Chinese newspapers, widely acknowledged as nationalist papers, are selected for analysis – *The Global Times* (GT), *Xinhua* (XH) and *China Daily* (CD). These three papers were chosen for three reasons. First, all of them operate popular English language version of their papers. This is an important consideration because in constructing perceptions of China beyond its shores, it has to engage its targeted audience in a language familiar to them. It has to be noted that there is a significant population of overseas Chinese (from the Mainland, Taiwan and Hong Kong), whom mainland media products compete with overseas editions of liberal Chinese language papers from Taiwan, Hong Kong and liberal western media as well.<sup>25</sup> In this sense, purely Chinese language papers (which all the aforementioned papers publish) fall outside the scope of this study. While it is not the aim of this paper to look into perception contestation between 'Western' media and Chinese papers, Chinese attempts to construct their national image were conducted within this dynamic and in opposition towards English medium news.

Second, beyond the 'English' factor, these sites are popular, visited by many non-Chinese visitors and these three papers presents, very generally, a good range of popularity – none of these papers were similar in their 'band' of popularity. That is to say, none of these papers are too similar to each other in terms of their popularity. It is important to get as diverse and as wide a range as possible in order to come as close to an accurate representation of English-language online news outlet as possible. Some may argue that major Western newspapers such as the Wall Street Journal or New York Times should be covered as these papers enjoy far greater credibility and circulation. However, these western papers were not considered for two main reasons. First, there were very few, if any at all, that gave space to pro-Beijing editorials and reportage. And for those that do – I highlight them in a section below. Next, these papers invariably

<sup>23</sup> [7], 119–137.

<sup>24</sup> [7], 121.

<sup>25</sup> I would like to thank one of the anonymous reviewer for stressing this point.



entail ceding editorial control and direction if engagements and promotion of messages were to be staged on those platforms. Nevertheless, it is crucial, for the purposes of this research that editorial control must be within the grasp of the party as this involves studying the images they want to promote.

Attached below is a table that shows the site's popularity and average daily visitor figures:

News outlet	Alexa's global rank <sup>26</sup>	Average daily visitors <sup>27</sup>
<a href="http://Xinhuanet.com">Xinhuanet.com</a>	64	529,599
<a href="http://Chinadaily.com.cn">Chinadaily.com.cn</a>	106	281,305
<a href="http://Globaltimes.cn">Globaltimes.cn</a>	3,239	51,088

While by no means a representation of 'Chinese media', the range of popularity/traffic and the diverse demographics of visitors make these three sites a good mix of English language media for analysis. A search on the terms 'hong kong protests', 'umbrella revolution' and 'pro-democracy protests' among others<sup>28</sup> will be conducted through academic LexisNexis as well as on the site's own search functions. Relevant editorials are then collected and manually grouped and interpreted to draw out any underlying patterns across the paper. A total of 117 news articles were looked at: 43 from GT, 39 from XH and 35 from CD which were of relevance and used for analysis. Additionally, other articles were also looked at under the search terms mentioned above but these had no relevance to the research at hand or were simply not related to the protest movement.

While negative coverage by the 'West' is not the focus of the paper, it is useful to discuss it briefly here. Western (global) media organs such as CNN, BBC, The Guardian, Deutsch Welle, National Post, Time, to name a few, which are based in North America and Europe. A careful reading of the editorials and media coverage from these media outlets portray, generally, the Umbrella Revolution and its protestors in a sympathetic manner. Although there was some space for pro-Beijing views in the aforementioned outlets, these were the exceptions rather than the norm. Beyond that, crucially, it framed China as an aggressor and its decision to prevent 'genuine' direct elections as wrong and misguided.<sup>29</sup> This view largely aligned with the leaders of the 'West' (The United States, Canada, Australia, United Kingdom, France and Germany amongst others) expressing support and concern about the protests in varying degrees. The statements of support by states together with the unparalleled, generally negative,

<sup>26</sup> These figures were taken from Alexa.com – a web analytics firm - on 10<sup>th</sup> March 2015. The rankings are calculated using a combination of average daily visitors to this site and page views on this site over the past 3 months. A rank of #1 would mean it is the most popular site in the world.

<sup>27</sup> The average daily visitor figures were obtained from [Compete.com](http://Compete.com) on 10<sup>th</sup> March 2015.

<sup>28</sup> A catch all phrase of 'hong kong' was used to capture any media content that might not have been captured through those search terms.

<sup>29</sup> A search through the aforementioned news outlet product editorials and reporting that were pro-democracy leaning. For example, The Guardian ran a sharply critical piece by Chinese dissident Wu'er Kaixi. see China doesn't know how to respond to Hong Kong's umbrella revolution, 2014. *The Guardian*. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/01/china-doesnt-know-how-respond-umbrella-revolution-hong-kong> and Huntsman, J. 2014. China's Hong Kong Dilemma, *CNN*, <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/10/01/opinion/huntsman-hong-kong-protests/> amongst others.



media attention on the Hong Kong protest 'forced' China's hands so to speak – they had to respond, they had to defend and react. Indeed, the Chinese media readily painted the protests as a “conspiracy”, one that is “backed by America” [30]. State media outlet – People's Daily – went as far as to specify Louisa Greve, a director of the National Endowment for Democracy of the US as instigating the protests [31]. Additionally, Western media began to run features and interviews on Joshua Wong – arguably the face of the protest. He was one of TIME's most influential teens of 2014 (he was cover featured in the October 2014 publication); was nominated for TIME's Person of the Year 2014 and was also listed by Fortune Magazine as one of the World's Greatest Leaders in 2015 at tenth place just seven positions lower than Chinese President Xi Jinping.<sup>30</sup>

### China as Benign, Restraint and Patient

Claims of China as a revisionist power have dogged China especially when the contestations over the South and East China Seas began simmering after 2009 in which various scholars marked as a time of increased assertiveness.<sup>31</sup> While Beijing has always maintained its 'peaceful rise'/'peaceful development' discourse, the Hong Kong protests afford Beijing an opportunity to show its restraint and its adherence to the status quo. This representation of 'status quo' alignment can be seen in its 'partiality' and professed faith towards the Hong Kong government even as it faces pressure to act directly.

An editorial in the GT on the 29th of September stated that: “The central government must firmly support the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region in taking resolute action against radical activities, including drawing the red line of Hong Kong's rule of law.”<sup>32</sup>

Another GT editorial states that “People around the world are pursuing democracy, but this takes time, said Charles Lu, president of the Roundtable of Chinese-American Organizations, adding that China is moving towards democracy at its own pace, and that overseas Chinese support the government's decision and ability to resolve problems peacefully.”<sup>33</sup> Similarly, a CD report noted that “Leung said the authorities have shown the utmost restraint to the lawbreakers”. [33] Furthermore, a CD editorial by Professor James Hsiung noted how the central government handled the protests “...this with self-control, through self-confidence and adherence to principles.” [34] The construction of China as one who is confident, restrained and self-assured is an important defensive move to counter western media criticism of its cluelessness [35] and how Beijing's action is harming Hong Kong [36]. More recently, a GT editorial on

<sup>30</sup> see Jackson, D. 2015. Leader of Hong Kong's student protest movement Joshua Wong in Fortune top 10, *Shanghaiist*. [http://shanghaiist.com/2015/03/28/leader\\_of\\_hong\\_kongs\\_student\\_protes.php](http://shanghaiist.com/2015/03/28/leader_of_hong_kongs_student_protes.php) and Barber, E. 2–14. Hong Kong Student Leader Joshua Wong Charged With Obstruction, *Time*. <http://time.com/3608696/occupy-hong-kong-joshua-wong-mong-kok-obstruction>.

<sup>31</sup> [32], see also Zhang, F. 2011. The Rise of Chinese Exceptionalism in International Relations', *European Journal of International Relations* 19(2): 310–11.

<sup>32</sup> See Street movement ruins Hong Kong image, 2014, *Global Times*, 29 September 2014. <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/884080.shtml> Last accessed June 5, 2015.

<sup>33</sup> See Weichi Sun and Du, L. 2014. Overseas Chinese call for peaceful, rational resolution to Hong Kong protest. *Global Times*. <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/885348.shtml>. Last accessed June 16, 2015.

the 2015 Hong Kong district elections noted that “Political parties supportive of the central government have retained a majority in Hong Kong’s district council elections” and that the vote showed a “desire for stability” [37]. The story, though, failed to take into account the in-roads so called ‘Umbrella Soldiers’ (candidates who were participants in the Umbrella Revolution) made in the elections – in which they won 15 % of all pro-democracy votes.

A significant surge of highly critical reporting of the Hong Kong police intensified after the police fired tear gas at the protesting crowd to disperse them on 28 September 2014 [38]. Chinese media had to counter this image with one of restraint and tolerance. One day after the ‘tear gas incident’, GT released an article praising the police for bringing order and showing restraint. It quoted a Hong Kong based criminal lawyer as saying that “the police have been restrained in their handling of protesters.” [39] Indeed, in the media coverage of events, a common theme emerges across the three media’s reporting – that the authorities (and relatedly, China) has shown restraint and has been very patient.

This angle has been taken up even after the protest movement died off. In 2015, China Daily reported that premier Li Keqiang has reassured people that the central government would not tighten its policies toward Hong Kong, the “one country, two systems” principle will not be changed, and that Beijing “will continue to support Hong Kong government and its chief executive” [40]. This was a response against critics who argued that China would increase its control over Hong Kong<sup>34</sup> and once again, put forth the image of a reasonable and restrained China.

There are two levels to this image construction. First, at the Hong Kong government level, the police force and the Chief Executive himself has been portrayed as being patient. This is of course, tied to Beijing’s own handling of the matter - preferring to take a backseat and trusting the Hong Kong government to manage the incident.

## China as a Victim

China has played the ‘victim card’ several times and is frequently employed by China to gain leverage both to the international and domestic audiences.<sup>35</sup> The protests allowed China to once again re-inforce the image of China as a victim:

“The West-supported external forces will continue cheering for Occupy Central. Exiles will take the Occupy movement as their chance. Their aim is to strike a heavy blow against China and take it down, but is this the goal of the young student participants of Occupy Central?” [41]

<sup>34</sup> See Forsythe, M and Gough, N. 2014. Hong Kong Media Worries Over China’s Reach as Ads Disappear. *The New York Times*. <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/12/business/international/hong-kong-media-worries-over-chinas-reach-as-ads-disappear.html>. Last accessed 10 February 2015; and Ortmann, S 2014. Beijing’s growing influence over Hong Kong. *East Asia Forum*. <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2014/09/25/beijings-growing-influence-over-hong-kong/>. Last accessed 11 February 2015.

<sup>35</sup> See Magnier, M. 2008. China plays victim for its audience. *LA Times*. <http://articles.latimes.com/2008/mar/17/world/fg-chispin17>. Last accessed June 9, 2015; Woo, A. 2012. China must shed ‘victim’ mentality. *South China Morning Post*. <http://www.scmp.com/comment/letters/article/1103934/china-must-shed-victim-mentality>. Last accessed June 9, 2015.

But this portrayal is not limited merely to a 'west against us' meme as another Global Times editorial shows: "Society in the Chinese mainland suffered greatly from the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) and keeps vigilant toward any signs of social disturbance." [42] The message conveyed is that China must also guard against internal problems and not be victims of domestic social troubles. Xinhua similarly reported on the protests from the 'victims' and 'foreign interference' angle with the Chinese Foreign Ministry spoke-person saying that "Hong Kong affairs are purely China's domestic affairs and China firmly oppose any foreign country's interference in any form." [43] A search for similar articles throw up repeated news reports that make identical references to its opposition to foreign interference.<sup>36</sup>

An editorial in CD by a professor spells out another common thread – that the students were manipulated by the west as pawns in a political game against China:

"National Democracy Institute (NDI), under the auspices of the State Department, were behind and indeed, were financing, the "Occupy" movement. In a Land Destroyer Report, Tony Cartalucci revealed details of a secret meeting which two opposition leaders from Hong Kong - Martin Lee and Anson Chan - held at the NED.

There, they confided that the true aim of the "Occupy" movement, planned from as early as April 2013, was to use Hong Kong as a base to "infect" China with its Western-style institutions, laws and interests." [44]

Indeed, many of these media coverage inveterately make mention of 'the West' in very critical terms. For example, a report on XH in October was entitled 'China rejects West's HK Criticism' [45]. The same people also published another editorial "China Voice: An absurd Hong Kong report by UK MPs" [46] rebutting the United Kingdom's criticism of China's proposed 'one man one vote' system.

The messaging above reinforces existing internal beliefs and perceptions of China under siege. As noted earlier, this 'playing victim' tactic is frequently invoked and has had, largely, limited effects on non-Chinese audiences.<sup>37</sup> These 'foreign interference' articles are also interesting because they all assume *a priori* interference. In other words, Chinese media did not simply raise the possibility of foreign interference but took massive foreign western interference as fact. This position of China as the victim was also deemed 'necessary' as a reaction and a rebuttal to western media who represented China as the 'bully'.<sup>38</sup>

## Perceptions of Support for China

Drumming up and publicizing the apparent support from elites and the lay person was most clearly shown in XH. This split is important to construct a perception of support from the entire stratum of society – from the elites down through to the humblest villager.

<sup>36</sup> A search across the three media outlets throws up almost identical news articles and headlines for example: 'China voices opposition to foreign interference'; 'China reaffirms opposition to foreign interference'; China urges UK to stop foreign interference'.

<sup>37</sup> Dr. Ting Wai.

<sup>38</sup> Hung Wing-lok, interview by author, City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, July 7, 2015.

Chinese media has been quick to tap into apparent support for its cause and its victimization. These include solicitation and subsequent publication of positive views to maintaining the status quo. For instance, a XH news editorial noted that different politicians from different countries ‘expressed disapproval’ of the Occupy Central protest movement. In that single piece, current and former politicians such as: K Shanmugam, Singapore’s Foreign Minister, Charles Powell, then private secretary to then British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and Jeff Bader, who ran Obama’s first term White House’s East Asia policy were cited voicing approval for the sovereignty of China over Hong Kong and their disapproval for the protests [47].

Beyond the elites, Chinese media has been able to mobilize and publicise support from ‘everyday’ people. In another piece by XH, Yin Haoliu, a Chinese American freelancer, was cited in a letter he wrote: “democracy is a step-by-step process that can not be approached in haste, otherwise it will bring about trouble.” [48] Yet another editorial entitled “Chinese public voice opposition against HK Occupy Central” gave voice to several leading academics in China. Space was also given to a villager from Rongzhong village who said “We are angry about the protest. Hong Kong is a free society but should have rules”, thereby dispelling notions of the protests galvanising a similar movement in China. Within Hong Kong itself, media attention was given prominently to people who opposed the movement such as ex-Chief Executive Tung Chee Hwa (covered across all 3 papers) who urged the student protestors to ‘go home’ and ‘respect the rule of law’. He also said publicly that China would not use force. This is an important statement coming from Tung as he is the vice-chairman of Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference. Here, once again, through Tung’s words and the heavy media focus on his discourse, we are able to get a sense of, not only the views Beijing wanted to convey, but also the image it has consistently tried to project in response to the media scrutiny the Hong Kong protests were subjected to.

At the grassroots level in Hong Kong, an image was constructed and projected to highlight the ‘wide’ support the Central government had and the great disdain they held for the pro-democracy ‘trouble makers’. This tactic frequently involved quoting ‘people on the streets’, and it is important that these people come from very humble backgrounds. For example, in a CD article - ‘*Cheers for HK police as barricades removed*’ - a newspaper hawker and a security guard were cited expressing their disapprobation on the protests and fears on their safety and future [49].

One other article in XH claimed that over 1.8 million signatures were collected from the Hong Kong people opposing the protest which directly counters the western media depiction of majority support for the protests [50]. Further to that, in view of the large number of countries expressing concern or openly criticising China,<sup>39</sup> it was important counter measure, to highlight countries that were supportive of China. For instance, XH gave coverage to Russia’s statement on the protests which noted that “Events in Hong Kong belong to China’s internal affairs” [51].

This is symptomatic of all the China-sympathetic reporting done across the three media newspaper as a response against pro-democracy media within Hong Kong (and the western media generally) who frequently invoke humble grassroots support for the

<sup>39</sup> See Stacey, K. 2014. UK treads softly over Hong Kong protests,’ *Financial Times*. <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/61aedf94-47bc-11e4-be7b-00144feab7de.html#axzz3dlWAdNRK> and Brunnstrom, D and Wroughton, L. 2014. China facing growing U.S. pressure over Hong Kong protests. Last accessed 20 May 2015.

Umbrella Movement. Part of the campaign in this push to project a show of inherent support is also the large amounts of pro-Beijing editorials that were released.<sup>40</sup> It is important to note here that, while limited, pro-Beijing editorials have appeared in popular media organs such as CNN, Washington Post, New York Times and the South China Morning Post amongst others.<sup>41</sup>

## Positive Ties with Macau and Taiwan and Students as Law Breakers

In a defensive move over reports and analysis that expressed the possibility of the protests 'spreading' to Taiwan and/or Macau,<sup>42</sup> a series of editorials and news reports were released to showcase strong ties between those region to the mainland while also 'warning' them not to get influenced by foreign powers [52].

"I believe that Taiwan has experienced two rounds of alternating political parties and has been making unremitting efforts to promote the transformation and consolidation of its democracy. Hong Kong's Occupy Central for universal suffrage is not a big case in Taiwan's democratic process for the Taiwanese people." [53] A somewhat subtler message was also released through editorials in China Daily. One report entitled '*Macao tourism 'golden', HK loses shine*', for instance, highlighted how Macau stood to gain economically from the tourism fallout in Hong Kong [54], giving Macau's economy a much needed boost reinforcing the state sanctioned perception of Hong Kong's impending economic demise and the damage done by the protestors.

Additionally, a GT media report - "Macao's relations with mainland strong despite Hong Kong protests" - gave exceptionally glowing reviews of Macau. Mo Shijian, dean of its Faculty of Law with the University of Macao said that the "Macao people have chosen cooperation instead of opposition, as majority of its gaming revenue comes from the Chinese mainland. As an SAR, we have to respect the country's sovereignty and systems, and try to strike a balance between regional interest and the whole country" [55].

<sup>40</sup> These includes: Wang, S-w. 2014. De-Sinicization won't succeed in Hong Kong. *China Daily*. [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/hkedition/2014-10/31/content\\_18832779.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/hkedition/2014-10/31/content_18832779.htm); Zhou, B. 2014. Why the rule of law must never be compromised. *China Daily*. [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/hkedition/2014-10/29/content\\_18818363.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/hkedition/2014-10/29/content_18818363.htm); and Hsiung, J. 2014. Students trapped in a terrible political game. *China Daily*. [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/hkedition/2014-10/23/content\\_18787589.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/hkedition/2014-10/23/content_18787589.htm). These authors mostly independent non-Beijing affiliated people.

<sup>41</sup> See Li, Eric. 2014. The umbrella revolution won't give Hong Kong democracy. Protesters should stop calling for it. *Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2014/10/06/the-umbrella-revolution-wont-give-hong-kong-democracy-protesters-should-stop-calling-for-it/>; Forsythe, M. 2014. Q. and A.: Michael Tien on Why He Thinks Occupy Central Is a Mistake. *New York Times*, <http://sinosphere.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/06/24/q-and-a-michael-tien-on-why-he-thinks-occupy-central-is-a-mistake/>; Lo, Alex. 2014. Hong Kong protesters lose support in the name of democracy. *South China Morning Post*, <http://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/1610220/hong-kong-protesters-lose-support-name-democracy?page=all> and Chow, R. 2014. Opinion: Hong Kong's 'silent majority' held hostage by 'Umbrella Revolution'. *CNN*. <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/10/01/opinion/hong-kong-silent-majority-chow/>

<sup>42</sup> See Steger, I. 2014. Chinese State Media: Why Can't Hong Kong Be More Like 'Content' Macau? *Wall Street Journal* <http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2014/12/31/chinese-state-media-why-cant-hong-kong-be-more-like-content-macau/> and Holliday, K. 2014. Will Hong Kong spark an Asian spring? *CNBC*. Available at: <http://www.cnbc.com/id/102039726>. Last accessed 13 May 2015. These are just a couple of the numerous articles and editorials (a search on LexisNexis Academic and Google News was conducted where thousands of hits were registered) where links were drawn on how the protests in Hong Kong would spread to Taiwan and/or Macau.

In contrast to the positive valorisation of the protestors, Chinese media sought to vilify the protestors. Analysing the Chinese materials on the student protests, several recurring characterisations emerge; framing the protestors as ‘violent’, ‘illegal’ and ‘radical’. Indeed, across all the three media channels, the protestors were almost always referred to as ‘*illegal protestors*’, not just ‘protestors’.<sup>43</sup> One XH article notes that “Hong Kong’s prosperity and stability are hard-won and should be treasured, while Hong Kongers’ free will shall not be held hostage to those organizers of the Occupy Central movement who have ulterior motives”.<sup>44</sup> Also on XH, another pointed out the illegality of the protest noting how the “violent radicals repeatedly provoked and verbally abused police officers and continuously incited others at the scene to charge the police cordon lines.” [56] This ‘violent’ tendency of the students was magnified, once again, through the voices of ‘normal’ Hong Kongers. One CD reported quoted a small business owner saying “I’m not worried about speculation that the protestors will return. I trust in Hong Kong’s rule of law and in the police”, the man said, who wished to remain anonymous as he *fears retaliation from protestors*.<sup>45</sup> The view that the Chinese media was portraying the students as ‘trouble makers’ during the Umbrella Revolution was also shared by political observers of Hong Kong.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, beyond the three media outlets analysed here, other media organs that the central authorities controlled has taken pains to paint the protests a radicals and extremists [57].

That there are radical groupings and that Hong Kong society, by and large, reject them is not contested. The clearest sign of this was shown during the 2015 district elections held on 22nd November 2015 where the most radical pro-democracy parties (People Power and League of Social Democrats) saw their combined vote share shrink around 60 % [58]. What is contested here than is the meaning of ‘radicals’ and Beijing’s strategy here is to portray all the pro-democracy groupings as ‘radicals’.

To counter the perception that the academic elites in Hong Kong were supportive of the protest movement, Chinese media also gave significant spaces to showcasing academics that were against the protest. These ‘third party’ voices were also used in the construction of the student protestors in Beijing’s eyes. In one lengthy interview, Professor Wong Chack-kie, of the Hong Kong government’s central policy unit and former faculty member of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, claimed that students were “[...] self-centered people who only persist in their own views. They ignore other people’s views and political reality, for instance, the central government’s consideration and the constraints of the Hong Kong government.” [59] The participating protestors, while acknowledging there were a small minority of ‘trouble makers’, dismiss the view that they were largely radicals and out to spread chaos. Indeed, they also viewed the media attempt to portray them as such as part of a reaction to how the western media were largely on their side.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, this contestation over ‘democracy’, ‘protests’, ‘governance’ amongst others, is set to continue well into the future as China seeks to exert greater control over the media and education fields in Hong Kong [60].

<sup>43</sup> A search across all the three media channels overwhelming referred the protestors as ‘illegal protestors’ instead of just ‘protestors’.

<sup>44</sup> See [48].

<sup>45</sup> Emphasis added. See Chui, T. Liu, L. and Li, S. 2014. Police clear Hong Kong protest site’, *China Daily*. [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2014-11/27/content\\_18986193.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2014-11/27/content_18986193.htm). Last accessed March 10, 2015.

<sup>46</sup> Dr. Stan Hok-Wui Wong, interview by author, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, July 7, 2015.

<sup>47</sup> Jeffrey Wong.



## Conclusion

This research suggests that 'defensive soft power' can be deployed to understand the Chinese government's response to perceived attacks. Through the mounting of this defence, certain state-sanctioned images of China are reinforced and promoted. Specifically, these include promoting images that depict China as a victim; portraying China as a reasonable and restraint power; constructing the image of wide support for China's handling of the event and of its of governance; and promoting the perception of strong relations between Macau/Taiwan and the mainland. It contends that these state-aligned images were released defensively to counter the attacks by the western media and this process allowed the Central authorities an opportunity to reinforce and articulate its national images. Soft power in international relations has generally been understood as a way of getting other countries to desire what one wants. This is achieved using several tools, including the media. As noted earlier, some scholars such as Callahan, has attempted to broaden this analytical definition and its analytical utility of soft power. This research contributes to that enterprise by highlighting how the image construction project in the Umbrella Revolution, is an example of 'defensive soft power' by China. Beyond the defensive aspect, it also shows the 'reactionary' aspect of soft power and draws attention to how Chinese foreign policy behaviour, as shown in this instance, can be reactionary in nature. Additionally, as this case demonstrates, contrary to popular belief, quick 'reactionary' responses are not necessarily incoherent and disorganized but can display a high degree of congruence and discipline with the release of state sanctioned messages.

Next, with regards to its deployment of defensive soft power through the media, two common tactics were used. The first tactic involved fact-like news reporting that (1) address, defend and directly refutes attacks on Chinese national image and ones that (2) promote a positive image of China. The second tactic involved using seemingly 'neutral' editorials - and writers not apparently linked to the Central authorities - to do the aforementioned to give its coverage a semblance of non-partisanship.

As costs for more traditional forms of contestation (such as traditional warfare, economic trade wars amongst others) increases, emergent forms of contestation through soft power in defending and advancing a nation's motives, interests and perceptions is all the more important. These modest findings of China's images help inform us of China's rise and the ways it may seek to defend and seize (back) the initiative in politically hostile and media un-friendly places.

Finally, it is clear from the findings how concerns about domestic stability cannot be disentangled from China's international relations and further highlights the usefulness of 'othering'. The pattern of invoking the invisible (or visible) hand of 'foreign interference' is a useful tool to gather (domestically and internationally) support for Beijing's position and afford itself more flexibility in manoeuvring and in exerting control in Hong Kong. Moreover, because Chinese soft power is not as strong and attractive as American or 'Western' soft power, articulating a viable 'Chinese model' is fraught with difficulties. As such, these expressions of Chinese national images are done opportunistically in instances where it could clearly state what it is not and what it is.



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**Dylan Loh** is a PhD candidate at the University of Cambridge and is a faculty member of the Public Policy and Global Affairs Division, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He has co-written a book chapter on the South China Sea disputes published by Routledge and written research articles on ASEAN for the Pacific Review and The New Zealand Review journals. This research was made possible by travel funding from the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies.